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Corset

Raul Cornier

University of Rhode Island, jraul_cornier@my.uri.edu

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“Every article of female linen, all those white under-things that are usually concealed, were here displayed, in a suite of rooms, classed in various departments. The corsets and dress-improvers occupied one counter, there were stitched corsets, the Duchesse, the cuirass, and above all, white silk corsets, dove-tailed with colours, forming for this day a special display; an army of dummies without heads or legs, nothing but the bust, dolls’ breasts flattened under the silk, and close by, on other dummies, were horse-hair and other dress improvers, prolonging these broomsticks into enormous, distended croups, of which the profile assume a ludicrous unbecomingness.”¹

Some of the first fitted ready-made garments in production were corsets. One of the most successful American companies was the Royal Worcester Corset Company. Founded as the Worcester Skirt Company in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1861 by David Hale Fanning, the company initially specialized in the production of hoopskirts.² By March 1, 1872, the company had shifted focus in production toward corsets due to changing fashions in women's dress. The Royal Worcester Corset Company closed its doors in 1950.³ President E.A. Meister donated a collection of 171 corsets to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in memory of his father-in-law and former Royal Worcester Corset Company president Isodor Roth, who assembled the collection. The collection now resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁴

Fashions of the Victorian period called for the use of the corset in order to accommodate the longer, hourglass shape of bodices instead of the shorter stays that had been used in previous decades. Corsets follow the contours of the body, while stays were rigid, and were meant to provide a flattened appearance of the front of the woman's torso. Whalebone busks and boning were replaced with curved structures achieved with wood or metal. Both stays and the corset push up the bosom.⁵ Modesty for women was a prevalent Victorian value, and the marketing of undergarments reflected these values, simultaneously pushing the envelope ever so slightly. Illustrations of disembodied torsos to model the garments reduced any perceived identity of the wearer to merely a dress form.⁶

Corsets were primarily utilitarian garments, offering support for posture, the creation of a desired silhouette for women of a particular social class, and a tool of societal norms imposed on women. The impetus of the corseting had historically been the cinching of the waist to create the socially desired small waist. Young women who were corseted before adolescence suffered from medical problems including fainting, shortness of breath, reproductive difficulties including miscarriages, malformed internal organs, constipation, indigestion, and headaches.⁷ With the death of Queen Victoria and an approaching new century, social activism scrutinized undergarments. The traditional view, that tight stays/corsetry were beneficial to a woman's moral character and physical health, was challenged by groups such as the Pre-Raphaelites, the Rational Dress Movement, and the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union. Corset alternatives such as the “health corset” were developed to address the medical issues.⁸ By 1910 the bust was not supported or covered by corseting. The “S” shape curve took form in lingerie, emphasizing a different bust shape, and slim lines as a result of the lighter fabrics used in dress.⁹

The study of corsets during the course of the twentieth century has connected corsets and the act of corseting to sexuality. By enhancing the female form into fashionable silhouettes, corsets provide the wearer a level of physical attraction associated with the Eurocentric feminine ideal, an aspiration to be at her most desirable. It becomes a tool to shape the body, creating an alternative “fashion body.”¹⁰



Figure 1 Royal Worcester Corset, circa 1898
(front exterior)



Figure 2 (interior)



Figure 3 (interior detail – proper right)

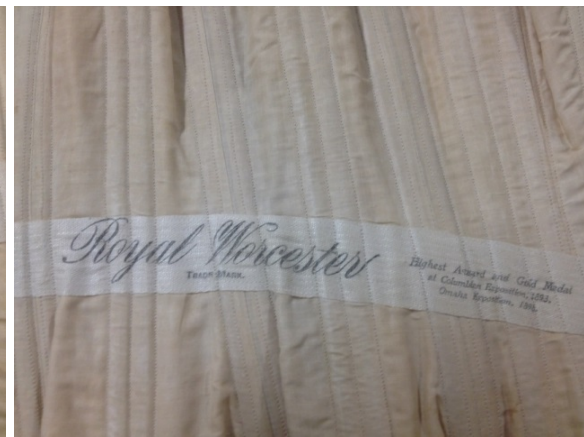


Figure 4 (interior detail – proper left)



Figure 2 (exterior – fabric detail)



Figure 3 (exterior – closure detail)

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